

Are you paying attention? Are you listening to what Jesus has to say? Because we live in an age which is full of distractions. Our attention spans have gotten shorter and shorter and shorter. I'll give you a few examples just to show how short they've really become. Did you know that in the 1700s, three hundred years ago, in the days of men like Johann Sebastian Bach, church services went an average of three hours? The sermon in that service was often the biggest piece, going for more than an hour, very often two. And on top of that, people in those days went to church more than once on any given Sunday. You went to church in the morning for three hours, and you went to church in the afternoon for three hours, so that the average Christian spent most of Sunday in church. And yet we, who have services which average an hour, start to get a little impatient once we get over that hour mark. We start to wonder, "How long is this going to take?" So, that'd be one example. Or to use something maybe a little bit closer to our own time, in the 1800s in the United States, when people wanted to find entertainment, because they didn't have radios or anything like that, they would go into town and listen to public speakers, people who would come in, usually like authors or politicians, and give a speech, and that was their way of getting some kind of entertainment. I know like in the days of Abraham Lincoln, for example, during his campaign speeches, he once had a debate that went all day, eight or nine hours. And yet our political debates today are usually about an hour, and whenever a politician starts to talk longer than about three minutes, we start to wonder what he's up to. So that's another way that things have changed. And did you know also that the average time that people spend on any single page on the Internet is less than a minute, often far less than a minute, sometimes a few seconds? And I'm sure we've all experienced that irritation which we feel when YouTube shows us an ad that we can't skip. We have become a severely impatient people. Our attention spans are quite short. So I think Jesus' question to us today is an important one, perhaps more important than it's ever been in history. Are you paying attention to what it is that Jesus has come to say?

Because that's what he's doing in this parable for today, Christians. He's talking about the people who aren't listening and the kind of people who are, because he says there was a sower who went out to sow his seed. And the seed is the word of God, Jesus speaking to us and bringing us his word. And the first kind of soil that this seed falls upon is the soil of the road, hard, compacted and dense, the kind of soil that would never allow a seed to take root at all. And Jesus says that the birds came along and ate all of the seed that fallen on the path. These are those who, when they have heard, turn away and refuse to listen, so that they open themselves up to the assaults of the devil, and the devil comes and takes everything away. And I think the way that we open ourselves up to this temptation, Christians, is when we encounter something about God's Word that perhaps we don't like. We don't want to hear it. We'd rather just not listen at all than have to listen to whatever it is the Bible has to say. And so we shut God out. We don't want to pay attention at all. An example, maybe an illustration that would work like this, something that might resonate with us more, is let's say somebody's calling you on the phone, and you have caller ID. You can see who's calling, but you don't know the number. What do you do? Do you answer the phone? Or do you just say, let it go to voicemail. If they have something important to say, I'll pick up later. Or perhaps even worse, if someone is calling you and you know who it is, but you don't want to talk to them, what do you do? Do you say, I'll call them back later? Or maybe I won't even call them at all. That's what it's like, Christians, for us to harden ourselves against the word of God. When we refuse to listen and to be in the things of God, it's like ignoring his call when he's trying to get ahold of us. But we might also do this in other ways too, when we are not being in the things of God. When we are not really paying attention in church, for example. Or when we're not really being in the Word, when we don't spend time in the Word. Or when we don't even go to church, that would be examples of what it would be to shut out God when he's trying to speak to us. And so let us not fall into this temptation, Christians, but let us listen when God speaks, so that we know what it is that he has to say.

The second example that Jesus gives us today is the seed which is cast upon the rocky soil, that which is full of rocks. It has soil in it, and so the seed can at least start growing, but it ultimately gets in the way so that when the sun finally beats down upon that crop, it has nothing to sustain it. It has no water. It has no root, and so it dies. That would be like us, for example, if you were talking to someone, and you were trying to tell them something, but they weren't really listening, right? We've all experienced this. Like a boss talking to an employee, for example, and the boss is telling you, "Okay, this is what you need to do. You need to do this, and you need to do this, you need to do this." Or a parent talking to a child, saying the same thing, "This is what you need to do." But then as soon as it comes time to do that thing, the first thing they say is, "Now, what was I supposed to do again?" Because they're not really listening. They're not paying attention to what's actually being said. They're off somewhere else, allowing other things to get in the way. And Christians we do this with God too, when we come and are here, but are just kind of going through the motion of things. When we're not really thinking about what it is that we're saying. How often do we say the Lord's prayer, for example, and we just say the words, but we don't think about what we're saying? That would be one example. Or how often do we come here to church and just say the words, but not really thinking about what it is that we're saying? When we do that, we are running into a real risk of just going through the motion of all of it and not really listening to what it is that God has to say. Let's not do that either, Christians. Let us pay attention and actually listen to the word of God.

The third example that Jesus gives here is the seed which is cast among the thorns. It's good soil. It will support a crop, but there's already so many other plants growing in it. If you've ever seen a garden which is overgrown, you know what this would be like. The plants are still alive, but they're not producing anything. They're not fruiting. They're not flowering, because there's just too much competition in the way. That's exactly what Jesus is alluding to. And we do this whenever we are having our attention go somewhere else, when we're not really listening directly to what God is saying. I know of a real good example of this in our own life would be like when you're talking to someone and they're carrying on a conversation, but they're on their cell phone the whole time. They're not really listening. They're just kind of half listening. And the problem with this is that when we do that, when we divide our attention, we might think that we can pay attention to both things at the same time, but in reality we're going to have to go one way or the other eventually. You're going to stop paying attention to one thing and start paying attention to the other entirely, because we can't listen to both at the same time. We do this as well with the things of God whenever we become so attracted to the world that we forget to listen to what God is saying. Because think of what God says to us so often in Scripture, Christians. He says to us, "Wait. Hold on. I will keep my promise. But I'm not going to do it yet. You have to be patient. You have to wait. I will do it." But then what does the world say? "You can have it right now. If you want money, just go work for it. You can have what you want. If you want pleasure, just go turn on the TV. Go turn on your phone. Go turn on whatever it is that's in front of you. You can have the entertainment you want right now." God tells you wait, but the world tells you, you can have it right now. And you can see why we would be so attracted then to the things of this world. We like the idea of having these things right now, that we don't need to wait for it. And so God, because we're dividing our attention, gets pushed out of the picture. When we are divided in our attention, Christians, especially with the things of God and the things of this world, eventually the things of this world will take over and we will not be listening to God anymore. So let us pay attention to that as well.

And of course the fourth soil that Jesus talks about today is the good soil, that which hears, that which does pay attention, that which listens and holds on to the Word and bears abundant fruit. And this is what Jesus is calling you to be, Christians, to be those who are paying attention, to be those who are listening. Now, it's important to remember at this point that we can't do this on our own. We are only able to listen because of what Jesus has done for us first. If it was left up to us, we by nature would

always be distracted. We'd always be looking at the world. We'd always be pushing God out. We'd always be doing something else. But Jesus has made you a new creation. He has created you to be a people who can hear, who do listen to the Word of God. And for that reason, it's all the more important for us to take Jesus seriously today, to listen to what he has to say.

Because, dear Christians, this Word is a treasure far greater than anything else in this life. The world will pass away. It will come to nothing. It will blow away like dust in the wind. But this Word, God's Word, is richer than gold, even much fine gold, to use the words of the Psalms. It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. This is the Word of life, the Word of the living God who is faithful and true. When everything else is gone, this Word will remain. So let us pay attention to it and listen to what Jesus has to say, because his words are the words of life.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.